



Popping the Bubble of Banter (LOL)

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“It’s only a joke!” is a phrase one might hear in justification of all crimes committed in the preceding sentences. This leads us to a thought-provoking question: can the mere intent of banter truly justify the already-undermined indecency of bullying?

Let us, first, acknowledge that the Sharī‘ah does approve of light-hearted wit. In fact, the books of ḥadīth have recorded many such examples of humour under dedicated chapters. These are usually titled ‘The Chapter of Banter’.

However, at the same time, we must not forget the Qur’ān and Sunnah have set guidelines to ascertain that society remains in harmony. This isn’t to be a ‘buzzkill’; rather, it’s a mercy to the Ummah.

If we scrutinise these guidelines, we can conclude that, in principle, there are only two fundamental limits which no-one may trespass: first and foremost, the joke should be completely true, entailing no shadow of lie.

Imām At-Tirmidhī رحمہ اللہ has reported a sound ḥadīth in his *Jāmi‘* that the companions of the Prophet ﷺ observed:

“O Messenger of Allāh, you engage with us in banter.”

Upon this, the Prophet ﷺ articulated:

“I do not utter except truth.”⁽¹⁾

It becomes clear from this ḥadīth that prophetic banter was free from all types of lies. This is the style we too ought to adopt.

The second law of humour is to ensure the content is not offensive. The sacred texts supporting this regulation are plentiful; far too many to collect here. An important āyah to keep in mind is the one wherein Allāh ﷻ affirms:

﴿وَالَّذِينَ يُؤْذُونَ الْمُؤْمِنِينَ وَالْمُؤْمِنَاتِ بَغَيْرِ مَا اكْتَسَبُوا فَقَدْ احْتَمَلُوا بُهْتَانًا وَإِثْمًا مُّبِينًا ۝﴾

“As for those who hurt believing men and believing women without their having done anything (wrong), they shall bear the burden of slander and a manifest sin.”⁽²⁾

⁽¹⁾ At-Tirmidhī (1990).

⁽²⁾ [Al-Aḥzāb: 33/58].

This is explicit in Islām's position against bullying in all its types. This message is precisely what the Prophet ﷺ had taught in a ḥadīth wherein he proclaimed:

« سياب المسلم فسوق ، وقتاله كفر » .

“To abuse a Muslim is vice; to fight him is Kufr.”⁽³⁾

One might be having thoughts while reading this article that this is such a ‘buzzkill’ and assume Islāmic banter to be void of humour. This is a false notion, based only upon one's lack of encounter with positivity in jokes. This needs to change.

Many books and articles have been written in compiling the banter of the Prophet ﷺ, his companions رضى الله عنه and even of the pious, knowledgeable personalities of later times. Reading such works will, InShā'Allāh, give us an idea of the etiquette of banter.

However, in order to acquire this style of humour, it can only be learnt and developed from the informal gatherings of the ‘ulamā’ and those who've learned from them. Witnessing such banter from a first-hand experience is the practical key to lock out the cruel targeting of an innocent human being, and open the doors of genuine, enjoyable humour.

Let us take a look at how the role-models of Islām would joke.

The Prophet ﷺ has been reported, in authentic narrations, to have joked with even those who are belittled in society. A bedouin by the name of Zāhir رضى الله عنه wasn't the best-looking of people; although, he did possess inner beauty. The Prophet ﷺ once hugged him from behind, in a way that Zāhir رضى الله عنه could not tell who had grabbed hold of him.

“Who is this?! Let me go!” he exclaimed. Zāhir رضى الله عنه then turned and recognised the Prophet ﷺ, upon which he didn't stop keeping his back attached to the blessed chest of the Prophet ﷺ, out of genuine love for him. This is when the Prophet ﷺ began saying, in banter:

“Who will buy this slave?”

“O Messenger of Allāh, you will, by Allāh, find me unprofitable.” Commented Zāhir رضى الله عنه, out of humility due to the false perception of society. The Prophet ﷺ then uttered words of gold:

“But, in the eyes of Allāh, you are not unprofitable.”⁽⁴⁾

Remarkable lessons can be learned from such an educative incident. A constructive technique is displayed which blends light-hearted humour with heart-rendering intelligence, wisdom and consolation.

⁽³⁾ Al-Bukhārī (48) and Muslim (64).

⁽⁴⁾ At-Tirmidhī in *Ash-Shamā'il* (229).

Other types of non-offensive, false-free wit have also been recorded in Islāmic history. The following is an extract from a compilation of Ḥalāl humour called *Humorous Anecdotes*. This particular incident occurred somewhat in the second century after Hijrah.

A bedouin frequented the lessons of the renowned scholar of Ḥadīth, Sufyān ibn ‘Uyaynah رحمه الله, and heard approximately three thousand aḥādīth from him. When he decided to part ways, the scholar asked him:

“From all the Ḥadīth you have heard from me, which appealed to you most?”

The Bedouin replied:

“Three aḥādīth stand out for me: Firstly, the ḥadīth narrated by ‘Ā’ishah رضي الله عنها in which she stated that Nabī ﷺ loved sweetmeats and honey.”⁽⁵⁾

“Secondly, the ḥadīth in which Nabī ﷺ stated that if supper is served and Ṣalāh is about to commence, then one should begin with the supper.”⁽⁶⁾

“Thirdly, the ḥadīth narrated by ‘Ā’ishah رضي الله عنها in which Nabī ﷺ stated that fasting while on a journey is not a compulsory act of piety.”⁽⁷⁾⁽⁸⁾

Such casual wit is applicable even in our day and age. It is a skill which ought to be learned and adopted into our personal lives, and not remain in mere theory on paper and/or digital publications. Our role model, Muḥammad ﷺ, has taught us the most finest fashion: in dress, appearance, speech and even banter.

Although laughter is the best medicine, an overdose of it can kill you. Imām Ibn Mājah رحمه الله has narrated a ḥadīth with a sound chain of narration which discourages excessive laughter.

« لا تكثروا الضحك ، فإن كثرة الضحك تميت القلب » .

“Do not laugh excessively; for, indeed, too much laughter kills the heart.”⁽⁹⁾

May Allāh ﷻ keep us all free from lies and offences; enable us to act upon the Sunnah of Ḥalāl banter, all the while refraining from extravagance. O Allāh, You have called us the moderate nation⁽¹⁰⁾; so keep us balanced in every respect. Āmīn.

⁽⁵⁾ Al-Bukhārī (5431) and Muslim (1474).

⁽⁶⁾ Al-Bukhārī (5463) and At-Tirmidhī (353).

⁽⁷⁾ Al-Bukhārī (1946) and Muslim (1115).

⁽⁸⁾ *Humorous Anecdotes* by Mawlānā Afzal Ismail, p107-108, taken from *Al-Mustaṭraf*, p614 (Nathr ad-Durr).

⁽⁹⁾ At-Tirmidhī (2305) and Ibn Mājah (4193).

⁽¹⁰⁾ [Al-Baqarah: 2/143].